

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4500

INFO AMEMBASSY COLOMBO

AMEMBASSY DACCA

AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD

AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU

AMCONSUL BOMBAY

AMCONSUL CALCUTTA

AMCONSUL MADRAS

C O N F I D E N T I A L NEW DELHI 3491

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINS, PINT, IN

SUBJECT: FLICKERS OF MODERATION IN THE EMERGENCY

REF: DELHI 1598

1. TWO EVENTS IN THE LAST TWO DAYS CAN BE CHARACTERIZED AS MODERATION OF THE EMERGENCY STRICTURES WHICH HAVE BEEN IN FORCE. GOI CHIEF CENSOR TOLD THE FOREIGN PRESS MARCH 8 THAT THERE WOULD BE NO PRECENSORSHIP IMPOSED ON REPORTING ON THE PARLIAMENTARY SESSIONS BEGINNING TODAY. EXISTING CENSORSHIP GUIDELINES WOULD REMAIN BUT IT WOULD BE UP TO EACH JOURNALIST TO EXERCISE THEM HIMSELF. VIOLATIONS WOULD BE DEALT WITH CASE BY CASE. THE DECISION APPARENTLY APPLIES TO INDIAN JOURNALISTS AS WELL, SINCE THERE WILL BE NO CENSOR

PRESENT AT THE PARLIAMENTARY SESSIONS. THE PRESSURE, HOWEVER, ON INDIAN JOURNALISTS AND EDITORS TO EDIT OUT "CONTROVERSIAL" MATERIAL WILL BE FAR STRONGER THAN ON
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FOREIGN JOURNALISTS.

2. THE GOI ANNOUNCED MARCH 7 IT HAD RELEASED BHARATILOK DAL (BLD) CHAIRMAN CHARAN SINGH WHO HAS BEEN UNDER DETENTION SINCE THE INCEPTION OF THE EMERGENCY. MRS. PILOO MODY, THE WIFE OF THE IMPRISONED BLD, TOLD EMBOFF THAT EVENING SHE UNDERSTOOD CHARAN SINGH HAD BEEN RELEASED UNCONDITIONALLY, AND THAT THERE WAS A POSSIBILITY HER HUSBAND AND CONGRESS (O) PRESIDENT ASHOK MEHTA WOULD ALSO BE RELEASED IN THE VERY NEAR FUTURE.

3. COMMENT: AS SUGGESTED REFTTEL, SOME RELEASE OF POLITICAL PRISONERS AND VIFOAL RELAXATION OF SOME OF THE EMERGENCY RESTRICTIONS WERE AMONG THE OPTIONS MRS. GANDHI HAS HAD BEFORE HER FOR THE LAST FEW MONTHS. THE ACTIVITIES OF RELEASED PRISONERS AND THE CONDUCT OF NEWSMEN IN REPORTING PARLIAMENTARY SPEECHES WILL BE WATCHED CAREFULLY BY THE GOI AND THE PM IN ASSESSING THE RISKS OF THESE MODEST MOVES AND EVALUATING WHETHER TO GO SLIGHTLY FURTHER OR PULL BACK. AS WE HAVE BEEN REPORTING, HOWEVER, WE DO NOT FORESEE A MAJOR RETREAT FROM GOI EMERGENCY POLICIES.

4. TACTICALLY, CHARAN SINGH WAS THE EASIEST OF THE OPPOSITION POLITICIANS TO RELEASE; HE IS NOT AN MP, IS A LOCAL RATHER THAN NATIONAL POLITICIAN; IS NOT AN IDEOLOGUE; AND MAY BE THE MOST MALLEABLE OF THE OPPOSITION LEADERS. THE RELEASE OF MODY OR ASHOK MEHTA WOULD BE MORE TELLING AND RISKIER, PARTICULARLY MODY WHO WOULD BE A FORMIDABLE OPPOSING VOICE IN PARLIAMENT IF PRECENSORSHIP REMAINS REMOVED.

5. THE DROPPING OF PRECENSORSHIP ITSELF MAY WELL BE A GOI ACKNOWLEDGMENT THAT IT IS HOPELESS TO TRY TO CONSTRAIN FOREIGN JOURNALISTS THROUGH THIS TECHNIQUE (ALL HAD FREELY VIOLATED IT DURING THE LAST PARLIAMENTARY SESSION) AND IT BROUGHT THE REGULATIONS INTO DISREPUTE IF THE CORRESPONDENTS WERE NOT EXPELLED. IF SELF-CENSORSHIP REMAINS EFFECTIVE WITH THE DOMESTIC PRESS, AND THE GOI PROBABLY EXPECTS THAT IT WILL BE, THE GOVT WILL HAVE GIVEN UP NO REAL CONTROL.
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